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CIA's skeletons are out of the closet

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Washington—Whatever its long-term impact, the Rockefeller report on the Central Intelligence Agency is a trove of events with overtones of tragedy, bureaucratic cover-up and, occasionally, humor. By its very nature, it details some of the agency's larger successes.

Most of the condemned practices had been discontinued, because of external pressure or internal concern, by the mid-1970's. But during the early years of the CIA constraints were fewer.

In the late 1940's the agency, aware of Soviet interest, began experimenting with behavior-influencing drugs such as LSD. In 1955, tests were begun on unsuspecting subjects in normal social situations. The report details how one test turned out:

"The inspector general reported that in a number of instances test subjects became ill for hours or days following the application of a drug. . . .

"On one occasion during the early phases of this program, LSD was administered to an employee of the Department of the Army without his knowledge while he was attending a meeting with CIA personnel working on the drug project. . . . This individual was not made aware that he had been given LSD until about 20 minutes after it had been administered.

"He developed serious side effects and was sent to New York with a CIA escort for psychiatric treatment. Several days later, he jumped from a 10th-floor window of his room and died as a result.

"The general counsel ruled that the death resulted from 'circumstances arising out of an experiment undertaken in the course of his official duties for the United States government,' thus ensuring his survivors of receiving certain death benefits. Reprimands were issued by the director of central intelligence to two CIA employees responsible for the incident."

A footnote to the report adds: "There are indications in the few remaining agency records that this individual may have had a history of emotional instability."

During the 21 years it screened mail between the United States and foreign countries, and opened 8,700 letters, the agency continually was concerned about the so-called "flap potential"—the danger of exposure.

Fretfully, the agency's deputy chief of counterintelligence talked of the need for what he called a "cover story" in a 1962 memorandum.

"Since no good purpose can be served by an official admission of the violation," he wrote, "and existing federal statutes preclude the concoction of any legal excuse for the violation, it must be recognized that no cover story is available to any government agency."

In case of exposure, the unidentified official concluded, "It might become necessary, after the matter has cooled off during an extended period of investigation, to find a scapegoat to blame for unauthorized tampering with the mails."

Actually, the Rockefeller commission reported, the agency did not follow these recommendations and made available all material on the project. Still, the report said, the memorandum illustrated "the thought processes of those involved."

With other episodes the report provided glimpses into a world that appears in popular fiction. It described the so-called "sheep-dipping" process, by which agents were prepared to infiltrate dissident domestic groups and thus acquire credentials for missions abroad.

The agency strayed from its mandate with a 1968 paper titled "Restless Youth," the report concluded, because it dealt with student revolutionary movements at home as well as abroad. In its conclusion, the paper gave what is now the general perception of most such movements:

"The motivations underlying student radicalism arose from social and political alienation at home and not from conspiratorial activity masterminded from abroad."

Concern over foreign influence on domestic dissent—reflected in the agency's operation CHAOS—occasionally resulted in great attention to triviality. One such anecdote turned on the CIA's file on Grove Press, Inc., which had published a book by Kim Philby, a Soviet spy.

"Grove Press, in its business endeavors, had also produced the sex-oriented motion picture, 'I Am Curious Yellow,'" the report said, "and so the operation's analysis dutifully clipped and filmed cinema critics' commentaries upon the film."

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